

**"O Holy Night..."**

**A Christmas Eve Meditation by the Rev. Scott Herr**

**First Presbyterian Church, New Canaan - December 24, 2021**

**PLEASE READ:**

**John 1:1-5**

I love Christmas lights. At the beginning of Advent, our youth organized a wonderful Advent workshop and part of the fun was going outside to light our little Christmas tree on the lawn of the church. It provided a perfect spot for our family worship service earlier this evening. A couple of weeks ago the Gillespie's guided Kim and me on a tour of some of the more spectacular Christmas lights around New Canaan, and we will enjoy showing our kids the amazing displays around town... Somebody's electric bill went up this month, right? But it's so worth it... Light in these dark days of winter is part of the Christmas story...

In Matthew's gospel birth narrative, the light of a star guides the magi to Bethlehem. In Luke the angels announce the good news of a great joy from the star-lit heavens. Even Mark who doesn't bother with a birth narrative quotes Jesus saying all will come into the light (4:22). In the gospel according to John, the Word became flesh and dwelt among us full of grace and truth and is the life that "was the light of all people." You'll notice this Light did not just shine long ago, once upon a time. John writes in the *present* tense, "The Light *shines* in the darkness..."

The date of Jesus' birth is more theologically than historically accurate. Christians began celebrating Christmas in Rome on December 25<sup>th</sup> around the middle of the fourth century. The date was originally a pagan festival in honor of the sun. Saint Augustine declared that *we celebrate not the sun, but him who created the sun.*<sup>1</sup>

Talking about the Light of God in the dead of winter is a bit of a paradox, either way. We celebrate God's Light around the Winter Solstice, the darkest day of the year. As we celebrate this Holy Night, we acknowledge the *mystery of it all*: the prophet who prepares the way of the Lord by crying out in the desert; the star which leads the magi; the virgin birth; the angels singing good news to shepherds in the field, and how God's glorious incarnation transpires through an ever so mundane manger birth to a teenager named Mary.

Perhaps the strangest part is that we gather and affirm even in the darkest of night, amidst the disappointment of the latest omicron disruption, the illnesses that won't go away, the endless violence and political chaos of our world, that there still is this light, this saving light that shines in the darkness...

Mary asks the angel, and many of us still ask, "How can this be?" The light may be dim at times but allows us to see God even in the *mystery and paradoxes* of life, to look into the dark places and acknowledge complexity and ambiguity; how we are so much more than our reductionist or news headline versions of ourselves, or the categories and labels we put on those around us.

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<sup>1</sup> John H. Leith, *Basic Christian Doctrine*, pp. 146-147.

The assertion of God's Word as light comes from Jewish wisdom. In the beginning, God looked out upon the dark and formless void, and said, "Let there be light." Light appeared, and God said, "That's good!" And from that day until now, God has been in the business of creating light; light to illumine the darkness, light to guide people, light to show us a better way. The history of God's interaction with humanity is like a string of lights that traverses the centuries from the beginning of time until now.

Light is how hope stays alive. Throughout history, there are bursts of light from great prophets who speak about freedom and salvation, who understand how the moral arc of history bends toward justice... There are times when the light seems almost extinguished. But we wait in expectation for the next blaze in the sky; we wait for the next burst of light from God. And we wait, and we wait.

I love that one of the first wedding gifts Kim and I received was a Hanukkah candle holder from Rabbi Sam Lehrer. It holds nine candles, one to light the other eight, recalling the legend of the 2nd century miracle how God allowed the oil for the menorah in the Jerusalem temple to remain burning for eight days, despite the oppression and desecration by the Greeks. The real miracle, Rabbi Cohen said, is that those rebel Jews lit the temple lantern not knowing how the menorah would stay lit. They trusted God even in the darkness...

Then, two centuries later, off in the distance was a faint glimmer, as if a tiny candle were attacking the night... There, over Bethlehem. Unlike the fireworks before it, this light did not burst forth in great splendor, but slowly, steadily, growing in intensity, adding lumen upon lumen to people's lives.

Again, God spoke a word of approval, saying, "This is my own dear Son with whom I am well pleased. Listen to him!" Later, one who had known this Light wrote, "In him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it."

That's why we've come here this night; because of the Light, the string of lights and the one true Light that continues to shine. Christmas is the celebration of the everlasting Light that can save us from the darkness that threatens to devour us, the darkness within that creates the darkness without.

It was in 1847, when a priest in Roquemaure, a small town just north of Avignon, asked his friend, Placide Cappeau, to write a poem for the Christmas mass. He composed a poem. Then Placide asked his Jewish friend, Adolphe Adam, to compose music, *et voilà*, we have the song called, *O Holy Night*.

What you probably don't realize, is that Placide Cappeau, as have so many, lost his faith; he lost his way... Sadly, the church banned the singing of the song for years. It was a Unitarian minister John Sullivan Dwight, who translated the poem into English, and because of the emphasis on freedom, *O Holy Night* became popular among abolitionists in the United States, and of course is now one of the more famous Christmas songs in the church today...

And so, the Mystery continues, how God chooses to work powerfully through the most unlikely people; unwed teenage mothers, faithless Frenchman, or even the likes of us. Friends, I hope you'll enjoy the lights, the lights around town and the lights on your Christmas tree. May they remind you always of the light of Christ that burns brightly this Holy Night. And although you may or may not become one of God's fireworks seen throughout history, remember that you are a light on the string of lights that stretches back through the centuries to that night in Bethlehem when God said again, "Let there be light," and Jesus the Savior was born. And so, we celebrate the mystery of God's love for us, that we too are part of the ongoing Christmas story that "the Light *shines* in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it."

*In the name of the One who is our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Amen.*